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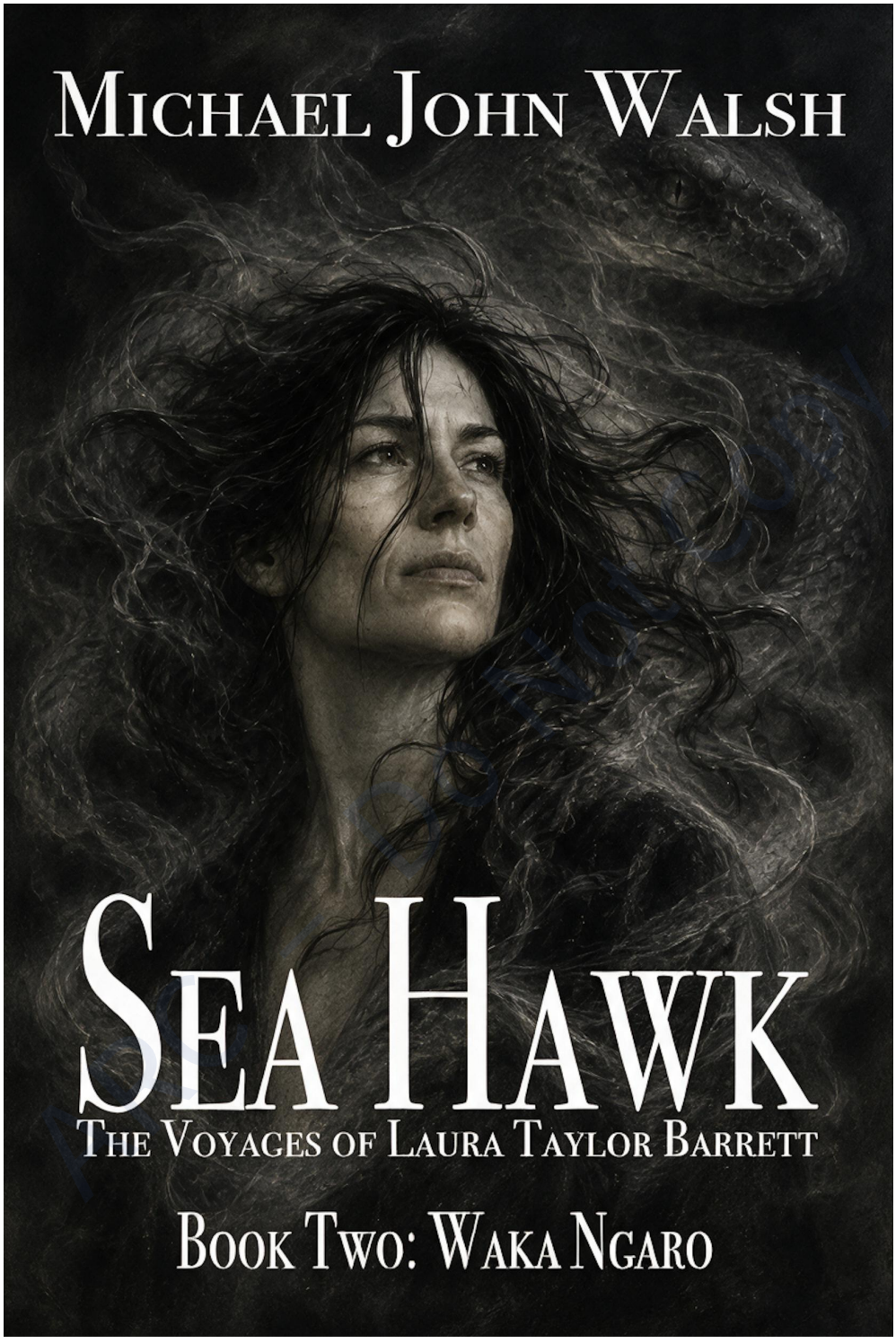
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SEA HAWK

By

Michael John Walsh

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Michael John Walsh
Sea Hawk
The Voyages of Laura Taylor Barrett
Book Two: Waka Ngaro

BOOK 2: Waka Ngaro

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MEDITATIONS

The Sea takes, but it also teaches… This is what I have learned:

When the sea is angry, it hides its secrets behind wind and white horses.
Sometimes, the sea is calm – like a mirror, reflecting sun, moon, stars… hope.

The sea is immense, like the swelling of a heart full with joy.

I cannot fathom the depth of these waters, but I am sure they are deep enough to swallow the dreams of all who cross over them.

Water, water everywhere is what the poets say…
To test the will and fortitude of sailors underway.

Nothing rewards the senses more than the smell of fresh rain on salt water.

I am at home among the beasts of the deep, and the birds of the sky.

A dream of the sea is as elusive as the boundary that separates day from night.
Try as you might, you shall not catch it.

Mist in the morning makes a mystery of the world.

Predawn is a dynamic, electric blue world coursing with caffeine and potential.

Oceanus is indeed alive, and it is a more-than-worthy adversary.

The sea is a capricious sailing companion, sometimes quiet, witnessing, waiting…
Sometimes violent and full of wrath.

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Sometimes, the ocean can feel like a sprawling desert – shifting under the hot sun. Waves, like sand dunes, undulate into the distance of a recumbent briny wasteland.

Mist is the sea choosing not to reveal itself all at once.

Great lumbering, rolling swells lift the boat, then gently, unerringly lay it to rest.

Nature is the only relationship man cannot live without.

The moon presides over swelling and ebbing tides, like the breath of a slumbering, watery beast dreaming of mysteries under slowly scrolling skies.

The sun rises in the east with colorful radiance, commanding the stars to surrender their seat in the firmament and slip quietly west into the waves.

The horizon is like an abstract thing. Always calling by degrees.

The wind in the rigging, and the waves on the hull are my lullabies.

Sometimes, it is impossible to tell where the horizon stops, and the sky begins. Like the tender moment that blurs the edges between dreams and being awake.

You can sail by the stars, but only the sea grants permission.

The stars at night are like a million light bulbs – all having the same idea at once.

The Cosmos is a grand, expansive thing – to which, the sea has a front row seat.

The ocean makes every certainty feel small.

Days, like life, must all come to darkness.

The horizon is always farther away than tomorrow.

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1. No Land In Sight

The Pacific greets her without ceremony.

As the *Sea Hawk* glides into the big blue, the ocean cleanses itself of intrusions, washing away the muddy evidence left by vessels from the other world. The amniotic waters – a mingling of silt and diesel slurry from Mira Flores – bleed into the open sea. Absorbed by the Pacific as it filters canal murk, restoring the purest shade of deep indigo.

Behind her, the Americas shrink into haze.

A mirror of molten glass stretches in every direction, reflecting a sun so bright it erases the sky. The air smells cleaner here – salt and ozone instead of combustion fumes and lock machinery. For the first time in weeks, Laura feels the pull of open water beneath her keel.

Like the mariners before her, she now stands at the precipice of the vast Pacific, measuring her resolve as the horizon beckons.

Ahead – nothing but distance.

The *Sea Hawk* moves gracefully, sails trimmed to a broad reach. She checks her course against the sextant reading taken hours before. The numbers are true. That

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precision calms her – suggesting she is in command of the world of wind and geometry.

Yet, something uneasy hums beneath that beauty.

Listening in the stillness, the ocean's presence feels unnatural; the light too pure, the silence too deep. After the mechanical thunder of the locks, the sudden quiet feels like absence – an emptiness that pushes back. Setting boundaries.

She adjusts the helm, humming a bar of Martin's favorite sea ballad.

"Farewell and adieu, to you Spanish Ladies. Farewell and adieu, you ladies of Spain…"

Her voice falters, swallowed by the immensity. For the first time, she realizes there will be no witnesses to what happens next – only Davey and the sea – across the slow turning of the world.

The morning wears on in an otherwise pleasant rhythm.

Laura munches Kachitos Nachos at the helm, crumbs scattering across the binnacle. A playlist hums through small speakers mounted to the Bimini frame – old pop songs, sea ballads, and a few of Martin's favorites. The melody that plays now carries a message almost too synchronic, but she listens anyway.

The chorus drifts out over the water, thin and thoughtful in the emptiness.

Between verses, she glances at the compass and the telltales, trims the mainsheet a fraction, and checks the shape of the jib. Her motions are automatic, fluid. After weeks of refitting, canal schedules, and follow-the-leader, the simplicity of an empty

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horizon feels like grace.

Miles of isolation lie ahead.

She smiles, gazing at the sea… *Time to cut the engine.*

Turning her attention back to the stereo, she finds comfort in song…

"Got out of town, on a boat to the southern islands.

Sailing a reach, before a following sea.

She was making for the Trades on the outside.

On a downhill run to Pape'etē.

Off the wind on this heading lie the Marquesas.

We got eighty feet of waterline, nicely making way!"

Laura sings along with Crosby, Stills, and Nash, enjoying the vibe and the day.

"Well boys, I don't have eighty feet of waterline, but the *Sea Hawk* has twice the heart at half the size!" she declares – grinning.

Her mood is upbeat – her movements strong and decisive. She works the lines with vim and vigor, while singing along with the stereo.

"I have been a–rou–ou–ound the world!" she croons, like David Crosby.

She adds a little headsail. Her sinewy arms ripple as she winds the Harken winch, paying it out gracefully. Then, a little more staysail with the touch of a button.

High atop the mast, the weathervane gyrates.

Pointing west.

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The Trade winds will carry the *Sea Hawk* swiftly out to sea. Ahead of her are deep blue skies, a calm sea state, and a moderate chop.

Laura begins the 54-day sail across the South Pacific, buoyed with excitement.

Not long ago, I couldn't tell a jib sheet from a bed sheet…

Now I'm setting sail, downwind on the legendary 'Milk Run.'

She stands at the helm, expectant, anticipating the Galápagos. Off her port side, dolphins appear – demonstrating incredible speed and agility. High above the mast, seagulls and cormorants fly as her escort.

The wind rushes through Laura's hair, feeding her exhilaration.

Meanwhile, Davey's attention is focused on the tasty flying fish.

In the distance, on her starboard side, is a rocky outcropping. A small barrier island that marks the beginning of a lonely chain. The tip of an ancient volcano rising off the seafloor in layers, striving for the surface.

The Galápagos are close.

Clusters of birds litter a jagged landscape.

Lazy sea lions populate the lower beaches of the lunar-like surface. They lounge playfully in great herds. Families, children absorb the sunshine like bathers on holiday. They notice the *Sea Hawk* and lumber into the water.

Laura shudders at the natural beauty, grasping the watch dangling on her wrist.

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While the music continues to announce her arrival, Laura takes an opportunity to consult her charts and get her bearings. She leaps down to her chart table below and plots her vector with a protractor and a compass. She studies a list of coordinates, confirming her course.

Then she jots a quick note in her logbook.

With a little luck, a stiff wind, and a following sea, we will slingshot around this small island archipelago and shoot out into the broader Pacific…

She punctuates her entry, pops the top from a cold bottle of water, and takes a long swallow. Then, she double-checks her course.

"We just need to steer clear of the Doldrums, Davey!" she warns.

She traces her route across the chart with a finger.

The Pacific triangle is a huge, calm zone running from Costa Rica, stretching west across the ocean, to the Marshall Islands. This massive zone of stagnant water is circled in pencil, and marked "Pacific Doldrums" on her chart.

It can cost days or weeks of delay, waiting for suitable winds.

The 'Milk Run' will carry the *Sea Hawk* safely south of this dead zone and swiftly west to Polynesia. She taps the chart, dropping her pencil. She notes the time on Martin's watch, pausing to reflect.

Distance over time equals motion...

Back up on deck, she studies the weather conditions.

"This looks like a perfect opportunity for a wild ride!"

She picks up Davey, whose attention is focused on a fish lunch.

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"It's a great day for our spinnaker!" she says to him. "What do you think, Davey?"

Davey cocks his head.

Laura disappears below, going for the spinnaker bag she keeps in the v-berth.

Davey slips through the hatch, tail twitching, as she pushes it out the salon door and onto the cockpit floor. Then, she hops outside and grabs the helm.

Laura spins the wheel hard to port, as she pops another chip into her mouth. Bearing away, she feels the wind on her face and turns to look behind the boat.

She licks her finger to test the wind. "Mmh! Nacho cheez!"

Hove-to, Laura hauls in the Yankee. With the mainsail luffing, she lets out on the main sheet to stall the sail. Then, tags onto the jackline and glides over the deck – the spinnaker bag trailing behind her.

She unhooks the spare line at the bow and clips the spinnaker to it; raising the downwind sail up to the masthead inside its sock. That done, she organizes the lines and traces them aft.

She pauses at the boom to let out some slack on the preventer.

Hopping down into the cockpit, she reefs the mainsail. Quickly, tying off the stack pack to secure the unused yardage. Lastly, using the spare winch, she furls in the staysail to a tight bundle.

"We're going to fly like the wind today!" She shouts proudly. "What we need now is a soundtrack!" She clicks through her MP3 player, looking for an appropriate track. "No…no…Nah, too mellow." She keeps skipping through songs.

Then, "Oh yeah!"

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As the *Sea Hawk* turns with the wind, “Baba O’Riley" comes blasting over the speakers. Laura screams along with the Who, feeling their energy.

“Yeeeaaahhh!”

Guitars and keyboards mix with Roger Daltrey wailing. The drums beat in time with tribal rhythm as the music rumbles through the hull, and the *Sea Hawk* proudly announces its visit to the Pacific.

Laura hoists the spinnaker sock, releasing the enormous chute.

It billows to life, with its logo proudly flapping in the breeze.

Three triangles floating above her – interlocked – leading the way.

She stands at the mast; holding onto the rigging, admiring the sail and smiling broadly, looking up at the colorful rag as it gulps a massive volume of air.

Immediately the boat lurches forward with the force of the added spinnaker. She is now dead downwind, surfing on a following sea, and moving at terrific speed.

This is the feeling she has been craving.

“Martin always said the spinnaker was like wings catching the wind. ‘We’ll fly with it,’ he used to say.” She gets flushed by his words. Laura watches the great sail proudly, and for the first time she feels she is truly soaring.

She looks back at the fading island.

Next stop? Open ocean!

The breath catches in her throat as she marvels at the *Sea Hawk’s* power.

“This is it, Martin! We’re on our way,” she cries. “There’s no turning back now… not ever!”

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Her tears blend with the breaking waves and the cries of the gulls.

The sea carries her vessel, wrapped in the comfort of her sails, while the sounds of her weeping are swallowed by music, and the rush of the wind.



It is pre-dawn.

A thin blue glow separates the heavens from the horizon astern.

Laura emerges from the galley with a steaming cup of coffee, still shaking off the sleep. She yawns deeply, drawing in the cool sea air – sharp with that familiar salty tingle.

The sea lies calm, almost glassy, casting back a flush of magenta and orange that trails in her wake. Ahead, the veil of darkness slips beneath the waves, releasing its grip on the brightening sky.

A lone frigate bird glides overhead silently, its graceful wings riding an updraft.

The beauty of it steals her breath away.

A thin mist rises out of the water as the marine inversion gives way to the dawn. Far off to her port side, not far away, between the *Sea Hawk* and another rocky outcropping that borders the southern Galápagos, a rasping and blowing sound startles her out of her quiet meditation.

Seagulls flock skyward from the rocks and begin screaming and diving at the

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water. In the instant that Laura processes what the seabirds are up to, she is struck by the appearance of several visitors.

She wheels around to see a small pod of humpback whales rolling lazily through the water on their great southern migration. Slowly, in sync with one another, they take turns rising out of the water, blowing and gulping air before diving back into the murky depths.

A frenzy of froth and splashing marks a funnel of krill being swept to the surface by these slow-moving giants. Their technique is both highly complex and miraculous. She watches from the cockpit – speechless.

They are hunting!

Laura is amazed at the size of these mammals as they sift mouthfuls of fish through their baleen before diving again. In turn, the seabirds compete for the scraps that the whales leave behind. Nothing goes to waste. The scene is a living tableau of closed-loop efficiency.

It is a deeply communal ritual that Laura watches with wide-eyed wonder. Then, the pungent odor assaults her nostrils like a sal volatile.

"Pew! There must be a lot of krill in the water this morning. You fellows need to go on a diet, or learn to brush your teeth!"

She and Davey have witnessed a rare bubble-net feeding event. Although Davey's reaction seems limited to stretching, smacking and licking his maw.

The sight of these colossal mammals is awe-inspiring.

Their execution is precise – coordinated and surprisingly graceful.

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Laura takes in the scene – savoring it.

In this operatic moment, Laura feels like a part of a larger world.

Later that afternoon, the sun is higher in the sky, beating down on the boat.

Laura has stripped down to her bikini and sneakers. Around her neck hangs the serpent pendant, dangling in the sun as she works. She glistens with sweat while scrubbing the fore deck with a brush. The work is vigorous but rewarding. Taking pride in and caring for the *Sea Hawk* is a welcome break from the monotony.

She dips the brush overboard, then drags it back and forth across the teak until it gleams in the equatorial light.

It has been weeks now since her assault.

Her figure shows marked improvement. Her body, once riddled with bruises and abrasions, has rebounded fully – sculpted and strong.

Her hair, at one time a wavy crop of shoulder-length tresses, has grown to a bushy mass. Dreadlocks have replaced her once restrained curls, giving her a striking appearance.

She is a vision of savage beauty and wildness set against an untamed sea.

All along the scuppers, and across the bow, dozens of black, wriggling fish have collected on her freshly scrubbed deck. Laura identifies them as flying fish because they resemble the tiny acrobats that follow the *Sea Hawk*, flinging themselves out of the water over extraordinary distances. Creating the illusion of flight.

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She decides to collect a few of them to use for fishing. She tosses the largest of them into a bucket to be cleaned and cut up for bait. Then she gets a splendid idea. The rest will become a delicious snack for Davey Jones.

Her feline first mate sits at the mast, licking his lips, anticipating a fresh feast.

Laura can read his enthusiasm like a book.

“You’re going to eat well tonight, my friend!” she says lovingly.

Davey stretches in response to her teasing, and lets out a gurgle of approval.

Some time later, Laura is seated in the cockpit. One eye on the navigation, the other on the water. Davey is lying sprawled out on the lazarette with a full belly, licking and preening himself.

Laura decides to cut-up some of the bait and drop a line behind the boat. She pulls the tackle out of a storage compartment under the seat. Selecting a large deep-sea rod and reel, she seats it into a receiver mounted to the stern railing. Then begins to load the hook with some of the flying fish.

She releases the hook over the side and casts the lure far out into the water. The hook skitters through the wake trailing behind the boat. She hopes the tiny offering will make a tantalizing morsel for a delicious sablefish, ocean perch, or mackerel.

“Let’s see if we can’t rustle up some dinner out here! A nice grouper or Mahi-mahi would make a nice meal! Eh, Davey?” She muses, as she plucks at the line testing the tension, then relaxes with a bottle of water to enjoy a bit of sunshine.

As she sits, eyes closed, enjoying the tranquility, a thought breaks the surface.

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From the beginning, her daily ritual of sailing has fostered a keen awareness of the boat as it performs on the water. She senses a "sluggishness" to her wake. She reluctantly opens her eyes to check the gauges at the helm.

"Three and a half knots SOG. Not terrible, but there is ten to twelve knots of wind." She considers the sail trim.

Typical for light wind.

She takes a look over the railing to see if she is hauling any debris in the water.

Nothing.

"You might just need a good scrubbing, old girl! The first calm day we see, you're getting your bottom scraped!" she says to *Sea Hawk*.

Just then, the reel on her pole begins to whine in protest.

Reams of line are being pulled from the spool, as she grabs it from the holder and pulls for dear life. The rod bends violently from the battle.

"First, we need to haul in our dinner!"

The reel squeals under the load as the drag clicker struggles with the tension.

The fish is good-sized and puts up a heroic fight.

Laura alternates between pulling the fish closer and cranking as fast as she can to take up the slack.

Gradually, the fish swims closer to the boat.

The workout is taxing for both of them. Laura can feel her limbs begin to tremble.

Pull… wind. Pull… wind.

Finally, the line goes slack.

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The fish has conceded defeat.

In its final death throes, it floats to the top of the water alongside the transom. Laura reaches over the side and gaffs her glittering prize, hauling it aboard. It is a beautifully detailed *Coryphaena hippurus*. Chefs the world over prepare it. Diners everywhere know it by another name: Mahi-mahi.

She pulls the hook from its mouth and grabs the fish by the jowls. She holds it up to get a sense of the size of her catch. It is a meaty twenty-four-inch specimen, all colorful with a thick ridge of spines along the dorsal crest.

"You're gonna provide some very nice fillets, my friend!" She offers it to the sky and gives thanks. "We're gonna eat good tonight!"

After a flurry of topsy-turvy prep, and a hasty sear, her reward is plated.

Laura returns topside to eat, and reflect.

No Michelin-Star meal ever tasted better.

The vestiges of the feast lie uneaten in her lap – scattered remains on her plate are tempting Davey with another snack. She sets her dish down on the cockpit floor so her first mate can devour it in peace.

Laura celebrates her successful day with a cold beer. As she sips, she smiles to herself with quiet pride. As she breathes deeply of the cool evening air, a wave of melancholy washes over her.

She is still not whole.

She reflects on the struggle – the fight for her meal – and discover a deeper truth

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about the contest. The balance between hunter and prey. The notion that something must die so that another may live.

Fatal necessity…

Everything in life is a zero-sum game.

The thought of Martin missing the events of the day casts a pall over the evening. Her victory is bittersweet, knowing this was the essence of his dream – for both of them.

She gathers up her dishes quietly and takes them below.

She checks her watch, then sets an alarm on the chart table. She tries to comfort herself by thinking of the bigger picture.

"That's enough contemplation for one day. Time to hit the sack. Dawn's gonna come early out here." she says stoically.

She sets the auto-pilot, douses the lights, and lies down to sleep and dream.



The obnoxious sound of her alarm wakes Laura from a dead sleep.

She sits up in her bunk and shakes off the disorientation that comes from three-hour sleep rotations. She rubs the grit from her tired eyes, and checks the time. It reads: four a.m.

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Three hours of uninterrupted rest on passage. Not bad!

The instruments at the chart station are lit up with an eerie warm glow that display status information like global position, point of sail, and wind and boat speed data – all visible from her watch berth.

Laura scans the readouts carefully – *no alerts.*

She flips a toggle above her head that turns on the watch lights – flooding the galley with deep red illumination.

Laura shuffles around the cabin foraging for coffee supplies. A large bag of ground beans sits on the counter. Absently, she throws a filter in the machine, along with four fresh scoops of the dark, earthy roast. She grabs her favorite mug from a hook suspended above the sink, and stands waiting to be infused.

She holds loosely to the fiddling that borders the countertop; a raised edge that gives purchase against the gentle rolling of the hull on the swells. While she waits, her dreams creep back into her waking brain, while the smell of fresh brewed coffee stimulates her imagination.

In those fragile moments, between the thread of reality she knows and the dimension of her dreams, she hears the laughter of a small child.

The sound is soft at first, then erupts into a chatter of excitement that is drowned out by the streaming, sputtering, and gurgling release of fresh coffee into the carafe.

She looks around the dim confines of the galley. The interior is messy.

She chalks it up to another unremarkable sound the *Sea Hawk* makes – going unnoticed during the course of a normal day. Laura shrugs – pours herself a steamy

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mug.

Suddenly, she is overcome by the overwhelming urge to throw up.

She questions the swells – a common cause of sea-sickness.

After an unproductive visit to the head Laura makes her way outside to the cockpit, drink in hand, and a dose of Dramamine tablets.

She steadies herself and tosses back the pills with a gulp of warm coffee.

It is dawn in the Pacific.

Laura stands teetering at the helm, drinking her coffee and taking in the fresh morning air. She feels immediately refreshed as the caffeine seeps into her bloodstream.

The air has a cleansing effect on her mind despite the lingering nausea.

Could she be drinking too much coffee? Nah!

A touch of salmonella from the galley? Probably…

She vows to do a better job of washing up. Instead she blames her sea legs.

Late on arrival. I guess…

By early afternoon, the staysail has gone limp, gently luffing on the breeze. The light-weight spinnaker is barely full and the mainsail is a mushy version of itself. She checks the wind-speed meter and notices the *Sea Hawk* has slowed significantly.

She slumps behind the binnacle to double-check her gauges.

Only one and a half knots of wind speed.

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She taps the readout.

We're not registering any boat speed in the water.

Well, not enough to worry about anyway.

She gives it some more thought.

The current is doing more to push us along than the wind…

She takes a look over the railing at the condition of the hull.

"This looks like as good a time as any to take a swim."

She yawns and digs around for her diving gear.

"I've put off giving you a good scrubbing," she says to the *Sea Hawk*. "We got away with it in the Galápagos, but now it is costing us vital speed."

Once topside, Laura looks out over the bow into the dark blue water. Shafts of sunlight shoot into the depths like fingers, disappearing gradually. She is captivated by the bottomless void – hemmed in by the mystery. Doing her best to remain passive, she heads back to the cockpit to check the depth finder.

"Two thousand six hundred feet. Ugh!"

Her reaction to the readout triggers more nausea. "You can do this, kiddo…"

She looks over the side once more.

The water is beautiful. Hypnotic and inviting – despite a distinct feeling of vertigo.

She dips a hand into the cool water.

The temperature is pleasant – maybe a tad chilly, but not too cold to go for a dip. Since the boat speed is essentially nil – drifting along with the current – she feels

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comfortable about leaving the safety of the *Sea Hawk*, as long as she takes the necessary precautions.

She decides to gather the cleaning tools and get to work.

But first, she drops the mainsail into the stack-pack, lowers the jib, and hauls the sock up and over the spinnaker. She is now floating on "bare poles." No forward lift.

She returns below to change into her swimsuit and swim harness. The full-body harness is a bit bulky, so she decides to forgo the wetsuit tunic to avoid getting bunched up in the rig. She opts for a clean half-shirt instead, to prevent chafing, along with her bikini bottoms for comfort – and the least amount of drag.

She pauses to look at herself in the mirror.

She is a long way from the woman who left the Bahamas.

Home seems even further.

I can't believe I'm going to do this…

She shrugs off a nagging feeling of recklessness.

It's just routine. Get in, get busy, and it's done.

Nothing to it…

She accepts the risk and finishes her preparations.

"Besides, I'm not setting foot off this boat and into that water without this thing strapped tightly around me." She pulls down hard on the shoulder straps. "I can't afford to watch my dream get carried away by the swells."

She returns topside.

One slow three-sixty reveals nothing but open water.

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"I'm a good swimmer, but it's a long way back to the Galápagos!"

She steps out onto the transom at the stern and grabs a hank of trailing line.

She ties overhand knots in the rope every ten feet or so. Then ties a figure-eight at the bitter end with a small dock bumper to help the line float near the surface. Then, she tosses the line off the back of the boat to let it drag in the water safely behind the *Sea Hawk*.

Lastly, she dons a pair of work gloves with the fingers cut off, fins and a face mask. She spits onto the lens of the mask, rubbing it around with her fingers, then rinses the spittle in the water.

"That should keep me from fogging up," she says.

Then, she ties herself off to a cleat with a shorter length of spare line, and secures it to her harness with a figure-eight. She grabs the brush in hand and takes one last look around.

No vessels in sight.

She takes a deep breath, then plunges into the Pacific.

The beautiful deep blue depths stretch out endlessly beneath her feet, as she floats near the surface. It is as if she can see hundreds of feet into the abyss.

There are no signs of life.

No fish, no bottom, and more importantly – no sharks!

She is relieved by that last detail. Although she knows it is irrational to fear an attack, she remembers the first time she saw the film Jaws – in a darkened theater from her past. Her nails dug deeply into Martin's arm whenever she heard the music. Ever since that day, she has had a healthy respect for the sea and its creatures – especially the scary ones.

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She breaks the surface for a gulp of air.

Bobbing next to her in the water is the *Sea Hawk*. The only home she has known for the past several thousand miles.

Her muscles tense, and she thrashes toward the swim platform. Then, she settles down. In her panic, she remembers she is tethered to a cleat near the cockpit, and there is a "last chance" line dragging in the water a hundred feet behind the boat.

She treads water, looking at the boat just a few feet away. The sight is still a little unnerving. Her eyes dart around reassessing her situation. She looks into the water at the knot tied to her harness. She is securely tagged onto the rope. She starts to calm down when she realizes she's not going to drift away.

With her emotions under control, she looks beneath the boat at the undergrowth that has accumulated during her trip. It is a tangled mess of green algae, seaweed, and other organic debris that must be removed if she is to gain back any of her precious cruising speed. She begins to aggressively scrub the bottom of the boat to loosen the seaweed accumulation that has been growing steadily since her trip began.

Gobs of green slime and vegetation drop away from the hull and float downward. It scrapes off relatively easily despite its lush appearance. She manages to clean long swaths from the bottom, taking huge gulps of air, and resting briefly in between.

Being careful not to gouge the hull, or damage the rudder and prop, she is able to quickly clean everything below the boot stripe. In all, the job has lasted less than an hour, and she is pleased that it was a manageable operation.

She tosses the brush into the cockpit and lies back to float and rest.

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It doesn't take long for her stifled grief to begin playing tricks on her.

She looks up at the clear blue sky, then down to the boat.

A gruesome thought enters her mind.

She focuses on the rope tied to her harness.

Casually, as if controlled by some morbid spell, she grabs the safety line. Slowly, she unties the knot and lets the rope trail away. There, under a canopy of sky that blends seamlessly with the deep blue horizon, she is momentarily detached from her security.

Floating freely – treading water.

"I could let go, Martin, if you want me to?" she whispers. "I could drift away beneath the waves. Leave this world and all its loneliness behind me." The air is deathly quiet. "We could be together. Just the two of us. Like we planned!" Her pulse quickens at the thought.

"No more grief…no more suffering."

Slowly and imperceptibly, the boat is drifting away from her.

Now twenty feet away.

Her safety rope is nowhere to be seen.

She floats there, in a trance, entertaining her compulsive fantasy. She looks at the boat through tear-filled eyes, knowing she is a thousand miles from anywhere.

She still misses him…

While she bobs gently in the water, she catches a glimpse of something moving

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along the safety railing onboard. She rubs the pain from her eyes and strains to see it clearly.

Then, she spots *him.*

The specter moves along the toe rail – a look of horror on a gauzy face.

He is reaching out to her.

A wave strikes her.

She rubs her eyes and looks again, but *he* is gone!

In an instant, she snaps out of her malaise, aware she has been playing a dangerous game. She panics, kicking madly in the water, the bulky harness hindering her movement.

Laura remembers the trailing line.

It's floating behind the boat!

She swims for her life, frantically kicking her legs with every ounce of energy she possesses. Trying to intercept her last chance at self-rescue.

She slaps aimlessly at the water in search of the rope, coming up empty-handed.

She scans the surface for the small bumper she had tied to the end, but the waves conceal it from her view. She panics and yells to the *Sea Hawk.*

"Don't leave me!" she cries, watching the vessel drifting – ten yards away.

Then, suddenly, like an answer to her desperate plea, the rope rubs along her leg just below the surface. She feels a knot pass across her thigh. Then another, and another. She grabs the rope with all her strength and holds it tight.

"Thank you!"

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For an instant, she is relieved. Only to realizes she must haul herself to safety if she is to escape the danger. Slowly, she drags herself through the water, hand over hand, as the waves inundate her face – making her gag.

Laura can feel the adrenaline spiking, as her pulse rings in her ears. She doesn't stop fighting until she grabs the ladder attached to the transom.

She leaps out of the water with a sheer force of will – landing in the cockpit, shaking with cold, and trembling from fear.

She is safe.

As the moments pass, and the adrenaline dissipates from her bloodstream, she curses her own fragile ego.

She breaks down on her knees and weeps from her gut.

"What was I thinking? I'm sorry, Martin… forgive me, please."

She lies there for what seems like an eternity. Sobbing deeply and uncontrollably until eventually everything goes dark.

She wakes to a gentle drizzle falling on her cold, bare skin.

Sitting up, she rubs her eyes and looks around – disoriented. For a brief instant, Laura does not recognize her surroundings. Then, it all comes crashing back in a rush.

How could I be so stupid?

Did I come all this way just to step off into oblivion…?

Numb and shivering, she looks out at the tremendous expanse of the ocean.

"I know better," she says, nauseous from the stress.

"I thought I was past all this…"

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She gathers herself up and heads below.

As Laura descends the ladder, she can still feel *his* presence – lingering.

Still bound to her in unnamed ways.

She isn't upset by *his* apparition out here on the frontier. *He's* done it before.

But how…? Why…?

She summoned *him…* and *he* came?

An illusory response to a momentary lapse of reason – surely.

With a sigh that feels like surrender, she decides to let go of her guilt… at least for now. Then, she makes a quiet pledge.

One nautical mile at a time…



The interior of the *Sea Hawk* is pitch black.

Humid. Stifling.

Condensation is dripping from the bulkhead into the salon and onto the passage bunk where Laura is asleep. Outside the boat, lightning cracks with terrible frequency, illuminating the cabin with brief flashes of icy blue light.

ARC – Do Not Copy

She is jostled awake by the violent pitching of the boat.

Something is wrong.

Laura can hear raindrops on the outside of the hull, drumming with a deafening sound. Bright flashes cut through the window coverings of the salon. While the companionway door is opening and slamming shut with the motion of the boat.

She rubs her eyes and struggles to make out details.

Why didn't she leave a nightlight on? Where is Davey?

Her mind wanders in an exhausted state of confusion.

Rain is getting into the salon.

Cold water pelts her face from the storm outside.

She knows the hatch to the salon must be closed, or risk the sole getting swamped. Then, she is struck with a terrifying thought as a branch of electricity lights up the sky.

"The sails!" she cries out.

For some reason, she cannot remember setting them, or rigging for foul weather.

"Dammit!" she exclaims. "I'll have to go outside!"

Concern grips her – the tempest is tossing the *Sea Hawk* with ferocity.

Laura jumps out of bed, fumbling around for the light. She struggles with her harness and raincoat while the *Sea Hawk* pitches and rolls endlessly. Scrambling up the companionway to the cockpit, she is met by the driving rain.

During the night, a tremendous gale has engulfed the boat. The wind howls through the rigging. Icy waves are cresting the bow, while sinister reverberations fill the air. Eerie sounds – like wailing – unseen voices calling to her.

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"L-a-u-r-a!" echos on the wind.

Terrified, she strains her eyes in the dark to see the extent of the storm. It is an enormous maelstrom, seething with unquenchable fury.

Brief flashes of lightning reveal the condition of the boat under engorged clouds. Directing her eyes upward, it becomes clear that the mainsail is on the verge of splitting at the seams from the force of the winds. Laura grabs the winch handle and begins to wind the sail down, drawing it into the lazy jacks. She stops half-way.

Only a small portion remains exposed to the storm.

Then, she loosens the jib sheet from the clutch and begins to furl it in as well. She locks it back with just a sliver of rag exposed.

"That should be enough – a jib and a jigger," she says, invoking Salty.

She looks at the forward configuration. The spinnaker sock is still rigged to the forestay. She must retrieve it, or it will be torn to shreds. She lowers the spinnaker line as the giant sock gradually sags onto the forward deck.

"OK, Laura, now comes the hard part," she groans.

She must venture forward and secure the sock. Then, on her return to the cockpit, she must tie off the stack pack so the wind does not pull it apart.

The stern of the boat pitches and sways in the wind and waves. As she begins to climb out of the cockpit, she glances back. The boat is dipping and diving, up one side of each wave, then surfing down into each trough.

Laura knows what this means.

"Weather helm!" She cries.

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The *Sea Hawk* is hobby-horsing. The hull is pitching front to back with the waves as the pressure of the following sea pushes the boat through the surf. She makes her way, slipping and sliding along the toe rail toward the bowsprit. She grabs the nearest rigging as the bow heaves out of the water like a breaching whale.

The rain is driving hard, hitting her face like a sandblaster – stinging and cold.

Drenched, but determined, she holds fast.

"Wait for it!" she tells herself.

As the bow dives back down again, Laura advances toward the pulpit and slips, sliding along the deck until she careens into the windlass with a sickening thud.

Now at the base of the jib stay, she opens the forward locker and begins to stuff the spinnaker into the small sail compartment. That done, she slams the hatch closed and checks the latches. Waves break across the beam, as she moves carefully back toward the mast step.

Back… Move… now..!

Her breath wheezes.

She ties off the stack-pack.

"Got to get back inside!"

Her shoes are slipping on the deck despite the non-skid surface. Waves continue to crash against the boat, soaking her to the skin. Her eyes are clouded with a combination of sweat, tears, and rain. She can barely make out the cockpit.

Suddenly, the heavy boom lurches – swinging in her direction.

It strikes her squarely in the ribs, driving the air from her lungs.

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Stunned by the blow, she finds herself sailing helplessly through the air. Floating in slow motuion – her pulse pounding in her ears until…

She splashes down into the turmoil and rush of the freezing water. Tumbling in the churning froth as the waves attack her skin like a thousand tiny pins and needles.

Her mouth and lungs fill with brine.

She gasps, choking for air.

Her rain gear is heavy. Filled with water. Tugging at her as she tries to swim. The hull slams against her head as it slips by in the chaos. She grabs desperately for anything to hold on to, but the gelcoat is too slick.

She cannot gain purchase.

Laura makes another futile attempt to grab the transom as the boat glides by – just out of reach. Her hands drag against the slippery hull, missing the last section of the swim platform.

From her point of view in the water, she has the sensation of falling as she watches the stern of the boat move away. The rain splashes all around her, pounding the surface of the water and obscuring her vision.

She wasn't clipped onto the safety line.

With the wind howling, rain driving in her face, she screams into the darkness.

"Noooo!"

She cries desperately for help.

"Martin!" she yells. "Help me!"

Then, it all goes black…

ARC - Do Not Copy

She jerks upright in the bunk – soaked in sweat, not seawater – bathed in the crimson light of the instrument panel.

The immediate feedback confuses her.

Her hands shake violently.

The storm was so realistic – so disturbing. Her conscious brain attempts to write it off as a vivid nightmare, but the pounding of her heart tells a different story. Laura's fear grips her with a single brutal question.

Was it a nightmare… or a premonition?

She clutches her spinning head.

"So real," she whispers. "So real…"



The *Sea Hawk* cuts through the open Pacific, maintaining a steady course.

Day after day, the horizon stretches in all directions – desolate and blue, an endless expanse of sea and sky.

Laura has learned that long passages require careful tending to routines. Daily log entries, meals, small maintenance tasks, laundry, and bathing – each done out of necessity, but also methods of marking time.

On this particular afternoon, Laura lounges on deck – book in hand. The sun is

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high, the wind steady. Everything is… fine. Too fine.

She marks her page, pauses and takes note of her surroundings. No pressing needs. No glaring emergency. Disruption is conspicuously absent from the day, and the boredom makes her uneasy.

What day is it, anyway?

She checks Martin's watch.

Keeping track of small details becomes increasingly tedious.

Nothing changes…

Laura flips through her book.

Skimming and turning each page.

Flip. Flip. Flip. Flip.

The boredom makes it difficult to concentrate.

The text begins to blur and flow with the sound of the waves. Hour upon hour, another book, another magazine, another page.

Flip. Flip. Flip. Flip.

Books are stacking higher by the week. Soon she will run out of reading material. Then, it will be a slow and steady devolution into instruction manuals, food checklists, culminating in the final indignity… The toothpaste tube.

She finally closes the cover on *Sailing Alone Around the World*, by Joshua Slocum. As she sits beneath her mast, mulling over what was just read, she acknowledges a kernel of honesty in what old Tom said to her that night in the pub. A

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lifetime ago.

"*Solo sailing ain't for the faint of heart, girl,"* he had spat.

On that they could agree.

But, Slocum has a kinder take on the issue of sailing.

If loneliness hadn't crept in at the outset, it has certainly found her now.

She smiles ironically.

"You were right, Joshua," she admits. "Isolation must be overcome."

In keeping with that wisdom, she heads down to the galley for a drink.

"We can add hydration to that list of routines," she mutters, climbing down the companionway.

Laura takes up her seat at the chart table, circling her position on the map and marking the slow progress across an enormous and monotonous ocean. She runs her finger along the line marked "Milk Run," looking for possible safe harbor.

The next island?

Still impossibly far away.

She tosses her compass down in a huff, then shuffles around, looking for Davey Jones. She finds him lounging on a shelf with some canned goods.

"Come on, pal," she says, scooping him up. "Momma's gotta eat."

Laura reaches into the food locker. The selection is limited. She grabs a can. *Campbell's Pork and Beans.*

She stares absently at the label, then opens it. She considers heating it, but the

ARC – Do Not Copy

swells are making it a little difficult to stand at the stove. She shrugs.

Eats straight out of the can.

She leans against the counter for support, staring blankly at nothing.

"So much for the romance, Davey!" she says dryly.

At sunset, Laura lies on the deck, staring up at the sky. Log book in hand.

Davey is curled beside her.

"You weren't very talkative at dinner, darling," she says, scratching behind his ear.

He emits a deep, rattling purr.

It's the closest thing to conversation she's had in weeks.

Minutes later, the captain and her furry first mate are enjoying a colorful twilight. She scratches her observations into her log – breathing poetic tone into repetition.

"The sky is ablaze in fiery oranges and reds as the great orb sits sizzling on the horizon. Meanwhile, Venus is making its debut for the evening – a brilliant speck emerging from the sun's corona…

To my stern, the moon is rising out of the waves in pursuit of the Sea Hawk, as it flies west on wings of Dacron and Spectra."

She closes the book on her musing.

Time to get a fix?

She ponders this.

What's the point? I know where we're going… That way!

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She points a salt-encrusted finger toward the orb, as it sizzles – *exit stage left.*

Laura stands at the helm, guiding the boat through gentle swells and humming to herself. It is an old song, but it was one of Martin's favorites. The only sound is the creak of the rigging and the hush of water against the hull. The horizon for all its grandeur – lurking in the dark. Never moving.

She has elected to go without the stereo tonight, preferring her own voice to the cacophony over the speakers. The mood is more intimate. More tranquil. Reflective.

"Sailing! Takes me away to where I've always heard it could be," she sings. "Just a dream and the wind to carry me. Soon I will be free." Humming. "Well, it's not far back to sanity. At least it's not for me, and if the wind is right, you can sail away – and find serenity. Oh, the canvas can do miracles. Just you wait and see." Her eyes begin to well up. "Can't you, believe me?"

As the Sea Hawk sails on into the distance, the sound of angelic singing reverberates off the glassy sea, growing fainter as Laura puts more miles between her past and the unknown.

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In the morning, Laura wakes up early.

She shambles across the wooden sole in her stocking feet and opens the food locker. Staring at the cans with a blank look, she begins yawning. She closes it again, opting for coffee instead.

"Strong and black," she says. "What Claire calls breakfast of champions!"

Armed with a fresh hot cup of Colombian blend she takes her position at the helm.

The navigation screen indicates clear skies and balmy temperatures for the surrounding area. Unusual for this time of year. Typically, there would be a regional squall, or something to register a distinctive green blob on the radar. However, not today.

Today will be more of the same.

Repetition – with a capital R…

As she turns off the weather forecast, she catches a whiff of her sweaty armpit.

"Pew! I stink!" she announces to Davey, "We can add showers to our agenda for the day!" She gives him a wink as he sits atop the companionway stairs. Davey appears indifferent to the idea. "You too, buddy!" she warns.

After breakfast, Laura sits at the stern next to the swim ladder.

She has stripped down to the skin and holds a length of hand-line in one hand and a bucket in the other. She ties the line to the handle, securing the other end to the railing. Now, she can toss the bucket into her wake and draw up a bath of clean seawater, while the vessel remains underway.

The bucket goes sailing into the foam.

She hauls the heavy load up using the rope.

The water is cold and clear and smells faintly of sea grass.

Laura dumps the bucket of seawater over her head, gasping. She repeats the process. Lather, rinse, repeat – until she is completely clean.

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Once bathed, she lies out on a beach towel to let the salt crust on her skin.

The fresh air dries her.

Nothing else matters.

Try as she might, there is no relief from the daily drain of isolation.

Her routines have become automatic.

The redundancy of passage life has begun to weigh heavily on her state of mind.

Well, Laura, you wanted peace and quiet… you got it.

Enjoy yourself.

Things could be worse…

At the helm, she checks the wind.

Light but steady. Always steady.

She sighs, turns the wheel, and watches for the wind vane to correct. It does – barely. The apparent wind is negligible. Even the spinnaker is struggling to stay full. She adjusts the lines to draw it in a bit.

Nothing changes…

That evening, the *Sea Hawk* encounters a patch of light precipitation. Barely registering on the radar screen. Unexpected drizzle – only a slight nuisance. Nothing to worry about.

Numb from a long day of boredom, Laura lies in her bunk – leaving the hatch open for ventilation.

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A few drops hit Laura's cheek as she sleeps.

Without waking, she pulls the damp blanket over herself and keeps on snoozing.

Outside, the *Sea Hawk* sails on, steady as she goes… still determined. Still alone.

The next morning, lethargic from the monotony of the evening swells, Laura discovers she has slept through breakfast. She wakes to a gentle nudging by Davey, sniffing her cheeks and licking her lips. He is telling her, in his own way:

"*Wake up! You've lost your rhythm!"*

She needs to rise and resume her responsibilities.

In this case, it means kibble when the seas are rough.

He places a paw softly on Laura's chin and mews in her ear.

"Meeoow," he complains.

"Yes, yes… Oh Captain, my Captain!" she groans. "You're right. I'm awake."

She rolls out of her bunk and checks the nav station.

"Still on course." She stares at the gauges – shifting in and out of focus.

A nod to the gods, and she throws open the companionway doors.

"Thank you, old girl." Laura says to the boat as she squints out the hatch at another watercolor reproduction of yesterday.

She puts on a pot of coffee, and sits down to make a journal entry.

Captain's log, SV Sea Hawk, Day… day? Something-something… One hundred thirty degrees west, fifteen degrees eleven minutes south. We are dead downwind at

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five knots SOG and moving slow. Days are long – nights are harder, and full of dreams. Out of fresh fruit and veg for a week now. Eating out of cans due to heavy wave activity. Trying to stay optimistic. Fifteen hundred nautical miles out from San Miguel.

No land in sight…

Around lunchtime, Laura decides to try her luck at a fresh catch. Too many meals out of a can have motivated her to bait the hook, and see what bites.

She casts her line behind the boat and seats it firmly in the rod bracket.

"Now we wait," is all she says.

Hours pass, but no fish are near the surface to feed. She teases the line a little to test the drag. A bit of tension suggests she might have something small on the hook, so she reels it in.

Nothing but seaweed.

She picks a slimy mass of sargassum off her lure and sighs.

She takes a cautious nibble.

"Yuck… bitter… salty!"

Frustrated, she bounds down the stairs and throws open the cupboard.

"Oh, thank goodness, Campbell's," she sighs. "M'm! M'm! good…"

She frowns and selects another can from her dwindling stash.

That night, the *Sea Hawk* intersects with another passing squall.

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Laura rides it out under the passage lights, like a grim shadow in her rain gear. Imagining the Pacific Rise weeping over her pathetic ambition. She sits behind the helm, silent, expressionless waiting for it to pass.

Eventually, it does. Just like all the others.

She thinks back, all those yesterdays ago, to the words she spoke at Alan – in her pain and frustration.

"I need more time!" she barked at him.

Now, Laura can only laugh at the irony of that idea.

Instinctively, she reaches for the chronometer on her wrist.

"Who was it that said, '*Time is relative'?*" she whispers to herself.

Her fuzzy mind loops.

Be careful what you wish for…



Laura sits cross-legged in the salon, a copy of Chapman Piloting in one hand and Martin's old watch in the other. She idly thumbs the timepiece, barely aware she's doing it.

She stares out the starboard window – eyes drifting across the water, unfocused.

Days seem endless, routines monotonous, and the sun relentless.

The lack of human interaction has left Laura hollowed out. Tedium carries weight

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now. Time passes watching the clock – in trance. Hour by hour.

She scans the ocean with the hopeless gaze of a refugee. Then, something changes. Her expression shifts. She feels something tugging at the edge of her senses. She turns her head slightly, eyes following the horizon.

Nothing but blue.

Waves that fold, and unfold – identical, interchangeable.

But the feeling lingers.

Davey Jones leaps out into the cockpit from below, and hops into Laura's lap.

"You feel it too, don't you?" she asks as she gathers him up.

She runs her fingers through his furry scalp as Davey purrs loudly. She studies his big green eyes as he blinks slowly – enjoying her touch.

"I am so grateful for your company, buddy! If not for you, I might have…"

The swells are soothing. Laura's eyelids are growing heavy.

Without warning, Davey puffs up, hisses, and scurries back down below.

"What the hell?" she cries as she inspects her leg for scratches. "Was it something I said?" she calls after him – dabs at her leg.

What's gotten into him?

She tries to shake off a gloomy feeling that washes over her.

A slight breeze picks up.

The sagging sails billow, but don't fill.

Laura notices the telltales spinning wildly. Then a stillness settles in the air.

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The sun ducks behind a cloud casting everything in shadow.

No sound reflects off the water.

Like the sudden hush of an uncanny conversation.

A slight clinking, high up in the rigging, is the only sound she hears. She strains to make out something. Anything out of the ordinary. She notices that the stereo is still on, but it is playing white noise. She clicks it off and looks around nervously.

Relax. It's just a freaky calm. Nature playing tricks again.

The air feels heavy.

"What the…" She recoils in fear.

"Who's there?" she calls out – her jaws tensing.

Nothing but the breeze.

A halyard begins slapping against the mast.

She can hear the gurgling sound of the bilge drains burping.

A jib sheave is banging against the whisker pole.

Nothing out of the ordinary.

"Okay, nothing to see here, kiddo," she says, trying to calm down. "Get a grip!" She stands and stretches – looking east, at a waxing moon.

As she looks out over the water, she feels a sudden chill down her spine.

Slowly, she turns around.

There is a faint shadow by the mast pulpit.

A form shimmering in the heat waves.

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Her eyes try to focus on the image of a man, sitting cross-legged beneath the boom.

"Oh, no. Not again…"

The lines from the boom preventer are slack, swinging with the roll of the boat. A pulley dangles in front of her face, causing her to duck out of the way.

He has returned.

The specter shifts from a blank stare to a subtle frown.

Laura's jaw drops.

She squints – blinks.

"We've gotta stop meeting like this!"

He nods slightly.

This isn't the benign form who appears from time to time in the corner of her eye.

He continues to stare at her with a blank look.

"I don't understand…"

She carefully climbs out onto the mid-deck, moving toward the mast.

He moves as she does, gliding along the opposite side of the boom.

She stops and sees *him* look back at her.

He mouths something unintelligible…

"What's that you say?"

Then, *he* ducks down the companionway.

ARC - Do Not Copy

Laura gives chase.

As she bounds down the ladder, she stumbles near the bottom – catching herself and stubbing her toe, unleashing a slew of expletives.

"Ow! Grrr… Goddammit …." She grabs her toe, wincing in pain.

She looks around the galley, but no ghost.

She checks in the watch bunk, but again, nothing.

She throws open the door to the head – no Martin.

She sits down at the table for a moment to rub her throbbing foot. She realizes that she is shaking uncontrollably. Then, as quickly as it started, her shaking stops abruptly. She smells the air – detecting a familiar odor.

"Is that… Cologne?"

A sound coming from the forward berth raises the hair on the back of her neck. She looks around for a weapon. Her eyes fall on the shotgun stowed on the shelf.

She quickly rethinks that.

"Easy Laura. Don't blow a hole inn the boat trying to shoot a ghost."

A quick double-take.

"Wait a minute! Why am I trying to shoot Martin anyway?"

She hears the sound, again.

She grabs a small broom and advances toward the V-berth.

There is a scratching sound coming from behind the door.

She flings open the bi-fold, as Davey Jones comes bounding out of the stateroom

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and up the stairs.

"Shit! Davey, I'm going to KILL YOU!" she shrieks.

She turns, shaking, back toward the galley.

"This is too much!" Her voice is dry in her throat.

Something is wrong…

She weaves over to the sink and pours a glass of cold water – drinks it down.

She detects a funny taste.

Metallic..?

She takes another drink.

She sniffs the water in the glass.

Swishes a mouthful between her teeth and spits it into the sink.

"Funny! Tastes a little…"

Her eyes go wide as she takes another sip.

"…Salty!"



Laura is back under the cockpit sole – legs flailing, squirming into the narrow compartment. This time, she is not picking apart the Yanmar. She is squeezing further aft, behind the engine, examining the water-maker assembly. Specifically, the

ARC – Do Not Copy

membrane cartridges and a small pump motor mounted to the bulkhead.

She curls up next to her work, feeling blindly for the part.

She locates it and discovers that it is covered in condensation.

Not so unusual.

Everything onboard Sea Hawk gets damp at sea.

Condensation in the storage compartments, and on the bulkheads is not uncommon. Ambient humidity is the root cause, rain, or air conditioning can promote an accumulation of water that must be drained.

Laura scrapes the pump case with a screwdriver and inspects the grime.

She sniffs at it. Rolls it between her fingers.

"Corrosion?" She throws her screwdriver down in frustration. "Dammit."

She reaches across the compartment and turns a valve. Then, she taps the pump motor with a wrench. Listens. Nothing. She smacks it harder out of desperation. Nothing. Reality sets in…

"It's dead."

Next, she turns her attention to the membrane; a long tubular filter that strains minerals and salt from seawater by way of osmosis. Laura pulls the membrane feed hose loose and examines the inside. A finger inserted in the end produces a gritty, slurry of accumulated salt, grime, and sediment.

"Not good," she sighs.

She wriggles out from under the berth, pulls up a wooden panel in the galley sole where she keeps spare parts, and digs around in the bilge compartment looking for a

ARC – Do Not Copy

solution. No luck.

“This is a problem,” she says as she continues to dig for a spare membrane. She locates the filter cartridge, but no pump. “Wouldn’t you know it! I have everything BUT a spare pump motor.”

She complains to Davey, who watches her tantrum from the safety of the bookshelf. “I don’t think I have the necessary components on hand to rebuild our broken one, either.”

She slams the bilge panel down amidst a flurry of curses that would have made Salty blush. She knows what is at stake here. She hops up and begins to throw open all the cupboard doors, the refrigerator cover, and the bench seat cushions in the galley.

She takes inventory. Runs the numbers in her head. Frowns.

“Not enough! Dammit, it’s not enough!” More curses. “What would Babs do?"

Laura stomps back aft, upset with herself for not having the proper parts on hand, but also for her bad luck. She crawls back into the compartment and attempts to remove the pump.

The screws holding the pump to the wooden bracket are rusted. She tries to loosen them with her screwdriver, but the metal is brittle and crumbles apart.

“Cheap screws.” Laura realizes it was a modification done early in the refit, before she understood the value of stainless steel hardware. She sighs.

“Penny wise, dollar foolish…”

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Laura lies there for a moment, fuming at her dilemma and scowling at the bracket when she discovers it is glued to the bulkhead. “Thank you, Chip!” She cries. “We may be off the hook!”

She jams the screwdriver between the bracket and the wall like a lever. Then, bracing her hands, she rips the pump off the bulkhead.

Eureka!

Moments later, the pump is slammed onto the kitchen table.

Laura grabs a tray of hand tools and sets up a workstation.

Slowly and methodically, she begins a surgical analysis of the pump. She works on it while reading instructions from *Nigel Caulder’s Boatowner’s Mechanical and Electrical Manual*.

Davey Jones is lying cautiously on a seat cushion watching Laura as she reads.

Her finger traces a section on water pump disassembly.

“Let’s see what we have here…”

She unscrews the cap on the enclosure. The entire harness pulls out to reveal a part of the armature. She inspects the contacts for fouling. Wipes them with a rag.

She tries turning the tiny piston mechanism by hand. It turns freely, but feels a little loose. “This could be part of the problem.” She double checks the manual.

“Not enough pressure in the membrane.”

Inspecting a section of tubing for a clog – she blows through it to clear it.

Next, she checks the seawater filters and lines flowing into the pump. All clear, save the expected amount of debris. Cleaning the seawater strainer yields a few

ARC - Do Not Copy

strands of seaweed, but nothing serious. She rinses the filters and reinserts them in their canisters. Then, she follows the plumbing path toward the membranes.

She pops the membrane housing off the wall, and loosens the feed-side cap. There is a small amount of debris in the membrane itself, and some more in the capsule, but for the most part, the membrane is clean. Salt deposits in the collector, and around the supply tube are clues pointing to her suspicion about the pump.

“Well, there is nothing I can do about the piston pressure.” She decides. “At least I can change out the O-rings and see if that helps maintain enough pressure in the membrane.”

Changing out the old compression O-ring with a newer, more pliable part takes no time at all. With that job finished, she begins reassembling and cleaning the case.

Finally, she is ready to reinstall the pump on the bulkhead. She crawls back into the tight quarters – screwdriver clenched in her teeth like a pirate in an old black and white movie. Once remounted, a quick tidying up around the workplace, and she is ready to test her work.

Laura throws the circuit breaker back on. No pump.

Frustrated, she checks the breaker with a voltmeter. All good. She tosses her rag onto the table and sits down in defeat.

She rubs her temples. She has a nagging headache – making her irritable.

“I don’t know, Davey. Maybe the relay is bad?” She considers this, then stops short. “It doesn’t matter. I don’t have a spare.” More curses.

Davey just gurgles and buries his head in his paws.

ARC - Do Not Copy

Even he knows this is bad…



Minutes of sulking have turned into hours.

Laura is slumped over the galley table – head in her hands.

Her cheeks streaked with dried tears – her eyes swollen and red from an epic bout of crying. Beside her is a pile of Kleenex.

The table is littered with notes and manic computations, some on scraps of paper, others written in the margins of her Chapman's Piloting manual.

Scratched on her map of the Pacific passage – her final indictment.

"Numbers don't lie…"

Davey Jones is still sitting on the book shelf behind Laura's head. He is purring and rubbing his head against hers – showing love and support. She gathers him off the settee and shambles toward the master stateroom to lie down.

On her way past the pilot's station, she checks her heading and wind direction. Boat speed is still painfully slow, and the course needs very little correction on the autopilot. She extinguishes the galley lights, except for a small nightlight, and sets a watch alarm for four hours.

She climbs into bed and arranges some pillows for Davey to curl up into. She

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fluffs her own pillow and leans back slowly – trying to quell the stress from earlier. As the boat gently sways from side to side, Laura tries to let her anxious thoughts drift away.

The fact remains. The water pump is malfunctioning.

Her supply of fresh water will not last the duration of the passage.

She can feel the fatigue lingering as her conscious mind drifts deeper toward sleep. Her thoughts shift, inevitably, toward… him.

She whispers softly, her voice trailing off.

"… You tried to warn me...?"

Martin. Always Martin.

A dim light glows in the small cabin.

Laura lies curled on the settee, a weathered book open across her chest: *Sailing Alone Around the World,* by Joshua Slocum.

The boat creaks softly with the sea's rhythm.

Her fingers follow the words on the page as she reads from Slocum's memoir.

"It is the mind that navigates the voyage, just as surely as the hand trims the sail."

His thoughts resonate with her deeply.

Her lips move slightly, repeating the line.

Laura's eyes linger on the next paragraph as the words transform. They come alive in the darkness, echoing throughout the *Sea Hawk.* Slocum's voice, gravelly and

ARC - Do Not Copy

assured, sounds as real as if he were in the room.

"There were days when the sea offered no sound but the breath of God, and I, alone with my thoughts, knew what it was to vanish."

Laura looks up – no longer in her boat, but on the deck of a ghostly vessel. Slocum stands at the helm of the *Spray* – his back to her, bathed in moonlight.

"Will I vanish, too?" Laura asks, dreading his response.

Slocum turns.

His face obscured by shadow.

"Stay the course," he breathes. "All tides in time."

Then, he returns to his spectral helm, murmuring, *"Hic sunt dracones…"*

Suddenly, there is a brief stillness, like a dragon gathering breath.

Then, a great wind kicks up off the water as Slocum braces for the onslaught. A ghostly howling rings in Laura's ears as the tempest envelops the captain and his boat.

She can only watch as the phantom vessel dematerializes.

Laura cries out as the sea takes her.

Weightless. Suspended.

"Don't go…!" she cries meekly. "I'm afraid..!" She gasps as the dark water recedes. "I'm not ready to vanish."

Far off in the distant void, Laura sees a dim light growing brighter. It is a warm light – inviting. As it draws near, she sees herself lying in her bunk back on the *Sea*

ARC - Do Not Copy

Hawk.

The sounds of the evening tide are all around her.

The wind blows gently through the rigging and luffs the sails softly.

The image is soft, but separate – suspended – punctuated by a slow and steady heartbeat – barely audible beneath the bubbling of the waves.

She floats – watching – strangely removed, as if her body has fallen beneath her.

Suddenly, there comes a great shrieking and a sense of falling from a great height. Her ears ring with a wail that seems to come from all around her – at the same time emanating from somewhere inside of her.

"I'm not ready…" she pleads.

In her darkest moment, the void does not answer…

For the second time, in as many days, Laura wakes from a dream – screaming.

Breath catches in her throat and a cold sweat beads across her brow.

Her heart is pounding in her chest. Her pulse throbbing in her temples.

She is gripped with nausea – a feeling of unraveling – confused by the meaning of what she has seen.

Was that a warning – ill tidings spoken by Old Tom?

Or, a transverted spirit suffering the same trials upon these waters?

She sits alone in the dark, listening to the sea outside. Nothing but the gentle slapping of the waves along her hull, as the *Sea Hawk* slowly meanders its way

ARC - Do Not Copy

through the doldrums.

Davey is snoozing softly near her head oblivious to her anxious manifestations.

If only she could be more like… *him.*

The synchronicity of Slocum's visitation and Laura's present situation is uncanny.

The middle of the Pacific is no place for the faint of heart…

Or the unstable mind…



A plastic water bottle is sitting on the deck near the mast step.

It has been cut in half.

A small accumulation of water sits at the bottom.

"Water, water, everywhere…" Laura snickers, swaying side to side. "They should say, 'Bottles, bottles, everywhere…'" She reaches down with a trembling hand, picks it up. She tosses back the little bit of liquid it contains. "…nor any drop to drink!"

She runs her finger on the inside of the container, lapping up every precious drip.

She rubs the drizzle on her crusty lips.

All along the top deck, forward and aft, are an arrangement of plastic water bottles, cups, and bowls from the galley. All accumulating rainwater.

Laura recites the *Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner* as she inspects her measly harvest. She stumbles on her toes, stepping clumsily amidst her makeshift collection.

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Standing at the mast of the *Sea Hawk*, she glowers in every direction at the vastness of the Pacific Ocean.

Every available container is sitting out waiting for rain.

This has been her strategy for the past several days with little effect.

She slips between each collector, looking for something to quench her thirst.

Her moves are lethargic, lacking energy. She struggles with her coordination as she makes her way around to the companionway – then disappears below.

Laura collapses into her seat at the chart table.

Time for another log entry…

She fumbles with impaired fingers – trying to hold a pencil.

"*Captain's log: November..."* She begins to write, but her eyesight is hazy. *"I am three weeks out of Panama. Maybe more? My hardship continues. The water maker has completely failed, and I am out of fresh water."*

She pauses to look out the porthole.

I have saved all my empty containers for gathering rain. All over the upper deck. What little rain I have seen has provided a minimum of drinkable water.

I'm thirsty. She pauses – exhausted. *So thirsty…*

I've searched the boat from top to bottom. There are no spare parts to repair the pump. I'm at least another twenty days from land. If the wind pushes me north, I will end up in the Cooke Islands. Or, I could wind up drifting south near the ill-fated

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Pitcairn Island – delirious – defeated by my own carelessness.

Her concentration falters.

Wind is steady. Light.

I may have to begin cutting my freshwater supplies with saltwater to extend the volume. She stops to rub her eyes.

My vision is fading. I fear too much salt will accelerate my symptoms.

Dehydration will get worse… followed by diarrhea, and eventually…

She pauses again, losing her train of thought.

I'm… Can't concentrate.

Fatigued… cramping.

Not sweating – skin is very dry – like crepe paper.

I…

The pen slips out of her hand and onto the table without resistance.

She holds her head in both hands.

Sobbing through dry eyes and sticky lips.

Then, she slowly doubles over in pain and falls to the floor.

She raises her head high enough to retch onto the sole of the galley. There is not much material to regurgitate. She holds her stomach as waves of nausea wash over her.

"I'm so thirsty…" she says with her eyes closed. "I don't think I can do this. It's too hard…"

Laura drags herself to her feet and climbs out to the cockpit.

ARC - Do Not Copy

The *Sea Hawk* is plodding along with the current.

She sits against the combing-board leaning back toward the water. She can just reach over and scoop up some seawater.

"Just a little drink, okay?" she looks around, confused. "Where is everybody? Doesn't anyone care?" She barks at her detractors. "What? Stupid? Who said that?" She is growing irritable. "I'm not stupid! It's just water… It's just…"

She stares at the wraith in the water.

The surface glistens like a veiled promise.

Her hand moves without permission. She dips it into the cool dilution and takes a drink – gagging immediately, vomiting up foam and sputum. Briny bubbles gush from her nose as she wretches uncontrollably. She collapses – becoming more and more confused.

Laura cradles herself like that of a drunkard.

"Okay, okay. Bad idea!" Her words are sluggish – placing a trembling finger to her lips. "It was worth a try." She shushes her ghostly critics. "I just wanted a tiny drink…"

She slumps on the bench in a daze.

The sun is burning her faster without the ability to sweat.

Her neck and back are the worst. The skin tightening and reddening noticeably.

"It's too hot, guys! I gotta go…" she says to her delusion.

She slides down into the salon and manages to crawl back into the passage berth. There she mumbles herself to sleep.

ARC – Do Not Copy

In a listless state, she is visited by operatic visions...

She is back in North Carolina…

Laura wanders aimlessly outside the house on the rustic Barrett estate. Pea-gravel crunches beneath her bare feet as she makes her way across the driveway to the yard.

Lightning pulses, slow and distant. Her memory tries to return as bolts of electricity arc across the sky like branches on leafless trees – illuminating the massive barn down by the river.

A chill wind cuts through her, and the cool grass feels damp underfoot.

The heavy doors gape open, shuddering in the wind, like the barn is breathing.

Cautiously, she approaches.

Inside, Laura can make out the menacing form of the *Sea Hawk* resting in its cradles under a tarp – like a patient about to be resurrected on the mad doctor's table.

Martin can be seen moving through the shadows, occasionally lit by the storm that rages outside. He busies himself with strange tools and equipment.

Sparks fly from just out of view, showering the ground behind the hulk, like a scene from a Gothic novel.

He stops what he is doing and calls to her. "Laura…"

Martin's image degrades, like noise on a TV screen, fringing and transforming into the face of… Lillian. "Laura? Honey? Can you hear me…?" She is searching for Laura in that darkened dimension. "It's all theater…theater…theater…"

Another huge bolt of lightning blinds her…

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Inexplicably, she is standing in the street in the middle of town.

The hardware store is lit up, and the front door is wide open. Salty is lurking there, motioning for her to follow him out back. She finds him standing beside a covered hulk, as the lightning illuminates his face.

Salty quickly whips off the tarp to reveal a boat.

It is the Sea Hawk… But how?

He holds a book in one hand and the tarp in the other.

"Read," he says to her. "Build it…" echoes in the air around her.

"Time is short..."

In her nightmarish state, Laura tosses and turns in her bunk.

"Build it." She murmurs, repeating Salty's ghostly words. "Build it.. Build…"

She startles herself awake.

There is real lightning occurring outside.

And lightning means…

"Rain..!"

Laura's eyes grow wide as the idea takes shape.

She stumbles to the bookshelf – holding her sides as her excitement builds. She pulls the "Art of Marine Maintenance" from the shelf and rifles through the pages – stopping on the section that describes how to build a water catchment system. She quickly skims the chapter, then slams the book shut.

ARC – Do Not Copy

Laura sits back in the settee, letting the images of Salty replay in her head.

"*Build it…"* he had said.

She stands at the companionway door and looks to the sky.

"Bless you, Salty. I understand!"

Operating on pure adrenaline, she begins to tear apart the salon.

Cushions go flying off the settee, revealing several storage compartments. *Nope!* She opens the door to the bathroom, then shakes her head. *No!*

Laura searches the galley desperately, wringing her trembling hands in an effort to stop the spasms. She throws open the lid to the refrigerator. Deep in the bottom is a plastic bin used to catch condensation from the compressor.

She pauses to consider its value. *Bingo!*

She begins pulling the food out of the refrigerator and tossing it into the booth. Once empty, she reaches down into the bottom and yanks the bin out from inside. She inspects it to make sure it is not damaged. *Good!*

She turns it this way and that to imagine its function in her endeavor.

"This will do nicely," she decides.

Next, she rummages through the lazerette outside in the cockpit. There is a green plastic tarp folded underneath some life preservers and ropes. Hastily, she pulls it from the compartment and unfolds it to see how big it is. Satisfied with its size, she gathers some supplies and runs across to the forward deck.

She spreads her gear out in front of her and kneels down to work. First, cutting pieces of sash cord to make ties.

ARC – Do Not Copy

Her movement is awkward due to excruciating muscle cramps.

Trembling fingers insert the ties into the grommets of the tarp one by one.

She begins tying the tarp to the rigging, stretching it out like a canopy, allowing the sheet to sag in the middle. Laura grabs a handful of tarp from the center of the sheet and twists it in her hand. She takes Martin's pocket knife and cuts a hole in the plastic, then lets the tarp drape back down.

Lastly, she places the plastic tub beneath the floating tarp and centers it under the hole. As the drizzle begins to get heavy, she stands back to inspect her work.

"Let it rain," she whispers.

She lifts her gaze toward the heavy gray clouds that converge over the *Sea Hawk.* A clap of thunder rolls across the sky as the raindrops begin to fall.

She closes her eyes to feel the drops pelting her dry skin and chapped lips. She was never more grateful for anything, as drizzle runs down her face like tears.

Her knees falter. She slumps to the deck.

"Thank you," she says softly, extending her arms to heaven. "I am saved." The danger appears averted. "For now." she whispers.

As droplets run down her face, cooling her skin, deep in her heart she knows…

Twenty days is a long time…

ARC - Do Not Copy

At dawn, golden light spills over the deck…

The Pacific Ocean is vast, featureless, and with the exception of gathering and dissipating clouds – unchanging. The horizon never moves. Neither drawing nearer, nor receding. The expanse of sea and sky blur into an endless blue void…

The silence of the deep, the isolation, the repetition – the thirst.

I'm slowly going mad…

The *Sea Hawk* glides gently on an endless wet desert.

Laura swings lazily in a hammock strung between the mast and the whisker pole.

"Small sips," she tells herself. She tries to rest while re-hydrating slowly.

A book rests open on her chest, unread.

The sails are softly lapping in the breeze. The rhythmic creak of the rigging creates a soothing rhythm. Beneath her, the boat moves slowly, cradling her.

Somewhere in the distance a seabird cries, but never reveals itself.

Absently, Laura watches the clouds shift and coalesce into strange shapes, but there are no messages to decipher. Nothing changes. Time marches on.

At high noon, Laura can be found seeking relief from the sun's relentless rays in the dark recesses of the forward sail locker. Curled up, nestled into the rough fabric of the sail bags. She listens to the sound of water rushing past the hull.

The only clue to movement.

The boat rocks – her body moves with it – breath synchronized with the waves.

ARC - Do Not Copy

She studies the locker's ceiling, tracing old stains and fingerprints left behind by the hands of the creator… *long ago.*

She closes her eyes.

The waves gently lull her to sleep, as the *Sea Hawk* continues to hold a steady course across miles of ocean. Day follows night, and night yields its dominion once again as dawn reclaims the world.

A dull, muted warmth of colors and smells find their way through the hatch above Laura's head. Gently waking her to a new day. Slowly she rises from her slumber – eyes crusted with salt and dreams.

I'm still here…?

The *Sea Hawk* creaks, and groans – in quiet confirmation of her continuity.

Rolling out of the v-berth her feet hit the floor. The sole is cool on her toes as she makes her way to the galley for a cup of life.

She looks at the distressing number of empty containers that litter the counter-space. Her supply of fresh water is dwindling again. She pauses for a moment, debating whether to use her precious provisions in this way.

Perhaps one cup.

Retrieve the pot.

Scoop the grounds.

Boil the water.

Find your mug.

ARC - Do Not Copy

… Oh, yes. Check the charts.

… Where am I, again?

Laura sits cross-legged in the cockpit, flipping through a book of collected poems. One page is dog-eared: *Sailing to Byzantium,* by W.B. Yeates. Her fingers tap idly against the page. Her thoughts mingle with the author's through a fog of caffeine.

Life is like an epic sea passage…

She sips, meditates, then sips again.

Words blend on the page – rising like wisps of truth.

"Whatever is begotten, born, and dies…"

Laura sighs, "Caught in that sensual music…"

"Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder still. For every tatter in its mortal dress, a monument to its own magnificence…" Yeats' speaks to Laura of transcendence and immortality. "*Therefore, I have sailed the seas…"* She swallows hard – turns the page. *"Gods… be the masters of my soul… consume my heart… and gather me into the artifice of eternity."* She holds the book to her chest. "*Of what is past, or passing, or to come."*

She stops reading and stares at the horizon.

The text blurs and bleeds into the late afternoon glare.

While the sunset approaches, she asks herself:

Once on the path, does the past matter anymore?

Real existence must be what remains of each moment…

ARC – Do Not Copy

She carefully closes her book.

And the future promises nothing.

"It's come to this," she says caressing the binding, "my boat, a book, and my battered tea kettle for aid and comfort," she sighs, watching the sun creep closer to the far side of the world.

Nightfall finds Laura in the galley, moving carefully in the small space.

She grabs the fiddling while filling a dented tea pot with herbal tea.

The hiss of the stove measures time as the water boils.

She watches in anticipation as the kettle weeps with the aroma of hibiscus.

It has a floral bokeh that is pleasant, tickling her nose, as it steeps in her cup.

She sits in the galley, one foot propped on the table, blowing across the surface of the hot drink. Small sips from the steamy cup help restore her fluid imbalance. Her symptoms abated for the time being – the herbal infusion saturates her consciousness, promoting calm.

Her logbook lies open beside her, but the pen rests untouched.

Later that evening, Laura is sprawled out in the quarter berth, curled on her side, breathing slow and deep. The low hum of the wind can be heard, accompanied by the occasional creak of teak-wood – and snoring.

The stars outside track patiently as the boat bears its captain faithfully along. The *Sea Hawk* remembers the way, even when she does not.

ARC - Do Not Copy

Her eyes twitch slightly in her sleep – she is dreaming. And the sea rolls on, whispering tidings only Laura can hear.

As days pass, the cycle repeats.

From the hammock to the berth, an endless parade of books, coffee in the early hours – tea for the quiet times. Always, and in-between, the stars mark her journey with the moon as her guide.

Laura moves through these spaces in a temporal loop. No changes to the routine. No landmarks to steer by – save her twinkling cicerone, who visits briefly at dusk and again at dawn each day to guide her. Marking the way.

No escape from the boredom, as the *Sea Hawk* presses on.

The vessel is a tiny dot on an endless blue canvas. No land on the horizon. No birds to follow to shore. No ships in her vicinity.

Just the great, insoluble expanse.

As she rests, her fears echo in the void.

I could be lost out here forever.

The true wind varies, perturbing my progress, questioning the accuracy of my navigation. I know I am close to the Marquesas… But how close?

I feel like I am running out of time…

ARC - Do Not Copy



It is another balmy evening.

At sunset, the sky is a pastel canvas of colors – embossed with stratified clouds.

The *Sea Hawk* is making headway into the Tiki Basin.

A slight westerly breeze is pushing the boat downwind at a steady five knots.

Laura's condition has improved somewhat, but the volume of drinkable water from her makeshift collector has not been enough to restore her vitality completely. She is still plagued by some side effects, specifically nausea, and fatigue.

She is seated at the chart table, muddling through calculations for landfall based on her present course and speed. She studies the LORAN in hopes of spotting any indication of land along her current vector.

The plotter is still blank.

The rangefinder sweeps absently around and around, but no hits. Only the occasional shadow from scattered precipitation breaks the monotony on the screen.

Laura traces a tiny triangle, representing the *Sea Hawk,* dead center of the blank radar field. She decides to head up to the cockpit to get a visual.

Nothing has changed from horizon to horizon.

She stands downcast in the afterglow of sunset.

No land in sight…

Davey has come out from his hiding place to weave between Laura's legs.

ARC - Do Not Copy

She picks him up. “No land in sight yet, Davey,” she sighs. “Sorry, pal!” She scratches under his chin to a gentle susurruss of purring and gurgling.

“Well, I am glad somebody is taking all this boredom and austerity in stride!”

She sets him on the seat cushion.

“I wish I could survive by licking the freezer condenser, and drinking canned milk!” she teases. “Unfortunately, mama needs more water to drink than that.”

Davey just yawns, licks his paws, and proceeds to clean himself.

Laura smiles broadly, deriving pleasure from his apparent lack of concern. He is faring well, under the circumstances, and this helps to lighten her mood considerably.

It is a beautiful night.

The air is cooling down, making the evening quite pleasant. The waves break across the bow in a slow, steady rhythm. The sails join in quiet harmony, rustling gently in the lazy breeze. There is a sweetness on the wind, slightly tangy, almost floral that fills her lungs with each cleansing breath.

The clouds have dispersed, leaving a throng of constellations twinkling overhead. The spume of the Milky Way rises across the firmament besprinkled with millions of tiny points of light. The epic size of the Universe is breathtaking.

It feels appropriate to take a moment, breathe deeply the cool refreshing air, and thank the gods for sparing her from misfortune.

Laura takes a seat at the base of the mast.

This was Martin’s idea of the best life. Our life.

She tries not to dwell on his loss, but to witness the splendor for both of them.

ARC - Do Not Copy

“Let me be your eyes now, Martin.” She gets misty. “There is enough here for a dozen lifetimes!” she whispers, sticky tears welling up in her eyes.

She notices something shimmering in the distance catching her attention. She strains to see what it might be, while wiping the crust from her eyes. Far off in the distance, a glowing stratus sits atop the waves. Like a turqoise mirage.

Laura watches with wonder.

The eerie cloud appears to be following the *Sea Hawk.* As it approaches, details begin to emerge, but something doesn’t register. The image feels out of place as she grabs her binoculars for a closer look. Her anxiety rises as she scans the darkness.

“What the hell?” she mutters in quiet disbelief.

She checks the chart plotter. No A.I.S. pings on the screen.

“Well, you’re not a ship.”

She checks Martin’s chronograph – marking the time.

So, what in blazes are you?

She peers at the image through the binos, trying to focus on any details.

She lowers her optics – rubs her tired eyes.

“Corona discharge?”

She first read about the phenomenon in Ellen Babcock’s memoir. Known as witch’s fire, or more commonly as St. Elmo’s Fire. She scrambles into the salon to fetch her copy – returning to the cockpit. Under the passage lights that glow over the helm station, she skims a page with her finger.

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The chapter reads, *"St. Elmo's fire is comprised of plasma, which is produced by lightning. The electric field causes ionization of air particles, resulting in a phosphorescent glow easily visible in low-light conditions. St. Elmo's fire is named after St. Erasmus, the patron saint of mariners. The phenomenon sometimes appears on ships at sea during stormy weather – regarded by some sailors as an omen…"*

She squints out over the water at the ghostly mirage.

Despite her curiosity, the vision seems troubling. Unnatural.

To Laura's surprise, the air turns dry. She gets a metallic taste in her mouth and a pang in her gut as her hair stands on end. Her skin prickles – charged with static.

"I'll be damned," she whispers.

She watches with surprise as the compass spins erratically.

"What in Hell…?"

The uncanny cloud skims across the water without making a sound. As it grows larger in her wake, it begins to pulsate – closing the distance at great speed. Laura is paralyzed. Collision appears imminent. She wants to grab the helm – to evade disaster, but her hands won't react.

She watches in terror as the phenomenon hovers alongside the *Sea Hawk*, matching pace and heading with her. The amorphous cloud sits off her starboard beam churning, as if observing her. As Laura stares into the center of the mass, a vague apparition emerges through the colorful discharge.

Are those sails…?

An anachronism straight out of another age. Commanded by a gruesome figure –

ARC - Do Not Copy

hideously disfigured. Its gaze fixed on Laura. Keenly aware.

Hauntingly familiar.

The phantom captain veers toward the *Sea Hawk*, on course to intercept.

Laura takes evasive action, turning hard to port.

In the final seconds before impact, the ghost ship vanishes. Dispersed into the night, leaving no trace – except for the faint, lingering peal of a weather bell. The sound of which carries across the water – hissing and fading from earshot.

Her heart pounds in her chest – pulse reverberating in her ears.

She runs her fingers through her energized hair as it crackles and glows.

Laura gasps. “If that’s an omen… to what end…?”

Stunned, she looks overboard for any evidence to suggest that she didn’t imagine the whole thing. A luminous streak of glowing violet effervescence bubbles in its wake. The froth cuts through black water directly toward the hull of Laura’s boat.

Had they collided, the *Sea Hawk* would already be on its way to the bottom – severed amidships – gliding silently toward a watery grave.

Shaken, Laura collapses onto the seat cushions trembling – questioning her sanity. Alone, and in shock, she looks up at her mast and sees the remnants of the blue glow all along the rigging, down to the spreaders. Veins of ionic discharge crawl around the boat – like a wreath of phosphorescent thorns.

The *Sea Hawk* radiates with an otherworldly light.

“It’s beautiful!” she whispers, glued to it – unable to look away.

ARC – Do Not Copy

She observes the terrible beauty of the phenomenon, while reaching out to touch the helm. Doing so makes her fingers light up with the same eerie glow. The effect is disarming as it spreads over her hands and arms.

As she moves them through the air – streaks of bluish plasma move in wisps off her fingertips. There is a slight tingling sensation as the ions creep across her skin. Like something reptant – consuming her.

She is engulfed by the scorching effect – like flames from a spectral blaze.

Her ears ring with a cacophony of voices speaking to her from very far away, and from all directions. She cups her ears as murmurs turn to screams, but she cannot make out any meaning.

Noises crackle in her head.

Her nose fills with the aroma of ozone – moisture evaporating from her throat.

The wind rises – soft and warm – like a sigh.

A sound forms in it, not quite a voice, warm. Like a memory.

"*Maeva hoa…"*

Laura's heart hammers in her chest.

As she listens to the tidings on the wind, the glowing softens, and darkness returns. She is alone again in the cockpit. Bewildered. Fatigued.

"Was it atmospheric… a dreamy illusion…?"

She feels clammy – anxious. Slightly dizzy.

Long moments pass.

The experience has left her emotionally drained.

ARC - Do Not Copy

The need to lie down is overwhelming.

Her body quakes, and her head throbs.

Her breathing is shallow and irregular, leaving her throat dry and raspy.

She sinks into the cockpit cushions and fades gradually toward unconsciousness. As the drowsiness grips her, she feels the oddest sensation. Like fingers stroking hair, tenderly, as she slips quietly off to sleep.

“Mmmh… nice…” She mutters insensibly.

The spirit of the *Sea Hawk* presses on. Silent and Steady. Bearing its ailing captain – maintaining course and heading.

In the dwindling aftermath, a breath of air pushes softly through the sails.

“Shhh… shhh…shhh.”



The first threads of daylight are reaching from the eastern horizon.

The Galápagos Rise trails far behind her now.

It is morning in the Tiki Basin, where the tiny *Sea Hawk* is making steady progress. High above, a gathering front of saturated storm clouds has converged on her position, forming a local weather event.

The air is thick with humidity.

Laura’s falling barometer reads twenty-nine-point-eight inches of mercury.

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Rain is imminent.

The winds have picked up, and the sails respond softly as the boat auto-corrects for the shift in wind direction. Near the bow, the draft is tugging and testing the tarpaulin that is tied to the rigging.

The hastily fastened arrangement has begun to unravel itself under the relentless tension. It begins to billow violently as the winds pick up.

With a loud whoosh, the wind gathers beneath the tarp and lifts it – ripping it free from the rigging. The force of the gust sends it sailing through the air and down into the waves where it floats on the surface a few meters from the boat.

The noise rouses Laura in her bunk.

She wakes to discover that, whether fatigue or carelessness, she has forgotten to set the passage alarm.

She slept through the night.

Her foggy error has allowed her to pass through a foul weather window, unprepared for the low-pressure system that has befallen the *Sea Hawk*. Rubbing her eyes, she emerges from the salon – yawning and sluggish.

As she surveys the surrounding area, the winds begin to pick up. Whitecaps are forming, and the wave height is increasing. Through the spray, Laura sees the tarp ebbing away from the boat.

“Oh no! No. No. No!” She cries in shock and disbelief.

In a panic, she rummages about.

She needs to retrieve the tarp before it floats too far away.

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A partial hank of yacht line presents itself, but it is too late. She tosses the line toward the tarp, but the plastic sheet has moved beyond her reach – beginning to disappear beneath the waves.

Her heart sinks watching as her providence is drifting away, helpless to prevent it.

As the sky darkens, the rain begins to fall.

Cursing uncontrollably, Laura retreats to the safety and dryness of the salon.

She gathers her wits and resumes taking stock of her supply of drinkable water. Thirst overtakes her, and she goes for a drink from one of her catch-bottles, thinks better of it, and puts it down.

She consults her charts and does some quick calculations. Trammel points scissoring across the map; a quick check of her watch; a confirmation of her position on the plotter.

Davey Jones wakes to the commotion. Laura works as he observes – loafing safely in the canned goods cupboard.

“Three and a half days to the Marquesas. Nowhere to make landfall until then.” She pauses to double-check the map. “No resources or ports either.”

Davey looks – licks his lips. Stretches.

“We will have to make do with what is in the hold.” She looks at the collection of water containers, canned goods, and sodas littering the galley table. “This is it until we make the barrier islands,” she declares, holding her head in her hands. “Here we go again,” she sighs. “With a little luck, we might make it.”

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Davey's reaction is indifferent. He simply yawns.

A short while later, Laura returns to the cockpit.

She needs to re-trim the sails.

The rain has abated, the sea state has settled, and the skies are improving.

She checks the gauges and feels for the prevailing wind direction on her face.

The sun has crested the horizon by now, and she begins to work the lines.

She furls the head sail and grabs the rope that controls the spinnaker sock. She hauls that line in and stows the wrangled rope on the upper salon. A loud *WHOMP* signals the lightweight spinnaker filling with air as it begins to lift the boat. With minimal effort, the *Sea Hawk* is running easily downwind. The breeze is cool on her skin and invigorates her mood, shifting the focus from thirst to the excitement of surfing ahead of a following sea.

The swells are broad with very little roll. The helm is stable and her heading is true. She settles in for an afternoon of six-knot winds – running with the current.

Hours pass without incident, turning slow-going into a full day with good wind.

Laura is hopeful, though her mind is cloudy, and her skin is still dry. Her lips are cracked and bleeding as she dabs a little ChapStick on them for relief. She decides to risk taking some water to relieve her thirst.

Just a few sips…

The sun is higher in the sky now, pounding down brutally on the outside of the boat. It radiates with waves of heat that bake the deck topside, while withering her body. Sweating is near impossible – as her skin burns.

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This is a contest of mind over matter – woman versus nature.

And she is losing…

Days pass.

On the eve of the third day, Laura struggles to prepare the boat to make landfall. The Marquesas are due west of her location and closing rapidly.

All is ready for the *Sea Hawk* to make an emergency arrival and anchorage.

Laura will need some time to recuperate. A visit to a doctor is becoming a clear necessity. Her limbs feel like they are full of jelly. Her stomach clenches at nothing. Breathing takes concentration, making each chore slow and deliberate.

She must conserve energy.

Mild tremors and muscle spasms have begun to interfere with task completion.

Her symptoms are getting worse by the hour.

In her weakened state, she has not eaten a proper meal in days. No water means no appetite, or worse indigestion – which means no bowel movements either. The effects of constipation have resulted in extreme discomfort, coupled with limited dexterity.

If these conditions persist, she will definitely need medical attention.

Laura sits at the helm, trying to make heads or tails of the chart plotter. Her vision is cloudy due to severe dry eyes, and her thought process is growing foggier. She looks down at two Davies sitting beside her.

"You two are supposed to help," she whispers.

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The second cat flickers but remains.

She reaches for them with some difficulty.

The two Davies rub their heads on her thigh reassuringly. “Oh well, at least I’m in good company!” she says trying to focus.

From Laura’s point of view, the gauges on the pedestal look blurry – difficult to decipher.

There’s too many!

She is plagued by a constant headache.

Highlights bloom intensely, giving bright details a dreamy halo. Conversely, it is difficult to distinguish between the sea and the sky along the horizon. As night approaches, details become more and more fuzzy – dim. Double vision is a problem, as Laura struggles to see clearly.

Her thoughts become more and more fractious…

The *Sea Hawk* continues to hold a steady line all night.

Eventually, daybreak arrives in the Basin.

Laura opens her eyes to a beautiful swatch of blue sky, peeking through the windshield of the salon. She sits up and enjoys the image.

“Baby blue,” she mutters.

Puffy clouds dot the sky, like cotton balls, forming strange shapes.

Laura stares at them with childish wonder – recognizing familiar forms.

“Turtle,” she giggles.

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Then, “Fish.”

A small, delighted gasp. “Bird!’

Her joy flickers – thin and fragile.

She is enjoying this game – until, *Boat,* enters her frame.

The thought of the boat makes Laura’s body tingle. A rash of goose bumps raises on her arm.

*What about the boat? s*he asks, to the breeze.

She struggles with a sense of anxiety. Something gnaws at the back of her mind.

I don’t remember…

She lies back on the salon bench, coiled in a ball.

Long moments pass as her confusion begins to lift.

Where am I? The question floats on the air. *Where are we going?*

*“*Something is wrong,” she decides. *“*Davey?”

Her first mate is absent, hiding somewhere below.

A thought surfaces in the back of her mind – like reason, evolving into awareness.

Have I done something wrong? Confusion. *I’ve only just woken up…*

“I slept all night,” she whispers.

She looks to the horizon, but no land. Only blue to the ends of the Earth.

She smelled the land. Didn’t she…?

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She failed to wake for her evening watch?

She slept through her alarm clock, and despite the navigation alarm indicating her arrival in the Marquesas, she continued sleeping – and the land slipped past in the night.

A wave of nausea shoots through her core.

"Shit!" she cries as she climbs out to the cockpit for a look around. "We passed them?" she whispers, as if speaking softly would make it less true.

The realization grows in her.

"We missed the Marquesas during the night…"

She hauls herself over to the chart plotter to check her position.

"Dammit! We overshot them by almost 75 miles."

She struggles to make the computation in her head when reality sets in.

"If we turn back now… it will take us a day and a half at least to reacquire the Marquesas." She checks her gauges. "I'm only doing five knots at present speed. If I come about, we would be against the wind and the current… doing… two knots, at best!"

She slumps into the cockpit cushions, defeated.

Nausea is getting the better of her.

"No choice but to alter course," she announces to the empty boat. "Tahiti is another day downwind."

That realization carries weight.

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"If the wind holds out."

Her head is throbbing.

A voice in the back of her mind speaks.

Follow the Southern Cross…

Someone told her that, once.

Hope for the best...

She resets her heading and checks her wind speed.

By now, the Davies have come topside to see what the commotion is about. "We might just make it, guys. Our only chance is to set the autopilot… for Tahiti."

She has to stay alert.

She takes a strained look at the radar. Looks clear.

"No weather, but the cross-wind… shred the spinnaker… must come down."

Her muscles cramp mercilessly as she stands at the winches.

She releases the tag lines and lowers the protective sock.

"Can't risk retrieving it…" she winces. "Have to let it hang."

She releases the headsail clutch and unfurls the jib. Then, she executes a jibe that puts her on a beam reach toward the Society Islands. The stern heels over, and the headsail snaps taught, as she comes across the wind. She releases the mainsheet to allow the mainsail to fill, then settles into her new heading.

Having executed a successful course correction, she turns to her electronics and sets the nav computer for a destination alarm at eighteen hours. Then, she sends out a

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general distress message through the A.I.S.

"I hope somebody hears us," she says as she pushes send. Then, struggles to go below. "Pape'etē… please be there…."

Sea Hawk's auto-pilot is set.

That will have to be enough – she needs to lie down.

"It's out of my hands now."

Before bedding down, she sips the last of the fresh water from a plastic bottle.

She swallows greedily.

Her body waits for more, but there is none…

"That's it, Davey," she says weakly. "No more water."

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